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# Beginnings of the African Diaspora in Texas: A Brief Overview of the Bernardo Plantation Archaeology Project

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## **March 2010 Newsletter**

### **Beginnings of the African Diaspora in Texas: A Brief Overview of the Bernardo Plantation Archaeology Project**

By Robert Marcom

The story of the development of African American society and culture in Texas begins with an ignoble event. Enslaved men, women, and children, both those born in Africa and in the United States, were transported to the region then known as New Spain to work as field hands and household servants. They performed all manner of work deemed to be beneath the “dignity” of their owners. More than 100 enslaved laborers were relocated from the state of Virginia to the Stephen F. Austin colonies by one of the most successful settlers -- Jared Groce.

Bernardo Plantation, established in 1822 by Jared E. Groce II, one of the "Old Three Hundred" settlers, is at once an historical as well as an archaeological treasure. Bernardo is the earliest cotton plantation to be established in Texas, and it would become the economic



**Location of the Bernardo Plantation, 41WL28, Waller County, Texas (image by the author)**

powerhouse for a new nation. Invited to the wild northwest of New Spain by Stephen F. Austin, Groce created a successful cotton plantation that took advantage of the rich red soils deposited by the meandering Brazos River. By 1824, the area was included in the new Republic of Mexico, part of the State of Coahuila y Tejas.

Jim Bowie visited the Bernardo Plantation, as did every important figure in early Texas history. The Austin Colonies revolted against the Mexican Republic in 1836. Sam Houston rested his rag-tag army of volunteers (and, possibly, a small contingent of U. S. federal troops) at Bernardo during the “runaway scrape.” Houston took possession of two small cannons there which became immortalized in Texas lore under the moniker of the “Twin Sisters.” The plantation structures, including the quarters, black smithy, stables, main house, and attendant buildings were occupied continually from the times they were built until the end of the Civil War. The plantation’s main house was disassembled at that time, and the logs and bricks were removed to another location. The agricultural fieldwork continued, and there is evidence of tenancy well into the late 19th Century.



**Sketch of the Bernardo Main House showing the “Twin Sisters” cannons by Mary Groce Mackey, Published in Parade Magazine, 1950.**

Research at this site will emphasize the lifeways and accomplishments of enslaved Africans and African Americans. At least two of the four sites for the “slave quarters” cabins have been tentatively identified through the use of remote sensing technology thanks to the contribution of expertise, equipment, and lab analysis by the Archaeology Division of the Texas Historical Commission. Under the direction of Dr. Jim Bruseth, utilizing both ground-penetrating radar and magnetometry, features were discovered and then geo-referenced on

historical maps. Excavations were conducted, which exposed those features and confirmed the locations and orientations of the plantation main house and outbuildings. The site has proven to be largely intact and undisturbed.

**Bill Pierson, Texas Historical Commission, conducts a magnetometry survey.**



We are excited by the opportunity to ask some important questions regarding early household and community activities of those enslaved at the plantation. We are particularly interested in evidence regarding religious activities, which might cast light on the inclusion of African-derived ritual worship as well as accommodation of Christianity. Other research



**Co-PI Robert Marcom displays a fragment of handmade brick (left); foundation for a brick chimney at the Bernardo Main House (above).**

questions will include whether cultural specialization occurred among those enslaved men and women, whether individual family activities can be detected, and to what extent material possessions changed in quantity and quality over time.

The Bernardo Plantation Archaeology Project was founded by Gregg Dimmick, James Woodrick, and Greg Brown. The project is managed collaboratively by the Community Archaeology Research Institute, Inc. (CARI) (Dr. Carol McDavid and Robert Marcom, M.A., RPA, Principal Investigators); Dr. Jim Bruseth with the Texas Historical Commission; Greg Brown, with Cowboys and Indians Magazine; James Woodrick as Project Historian; Gregg Dimmick with The Friends of San Jacinto, Inc.; and Charlie Gordy with the Houston Archaeological Society. Additional support is provided by a number of other groups and individuals. To learn more, contact Dr. Carol McDavid, [mcdavid@publicarchaeology.org](mailto:mcdavid@publicarchaeology.org). CARI is a tax exempt organization under IRS Code Section 501(c)(3). A project website is available at: <http://wiki.bernardoplantation.org>.

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